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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the development of interactive business letters as a form of peer review of writing, presents the activities's general operation, and discusses its benefits by presenting examples of actual student peer reviews from the International Trade Institute graduate school in Taiwan. Rather than have students read and critique each other's work using peer review sheets, this English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) teacher in Taiwan had students assume the roles of players actively involved in a written, business negotiation. Throughout the game, the teacher would read, respond to, and evaluate the correspondence to balance peer responses with instructor feedback. Results revealed that student interactive letters injected a strong element of realism into the peer review process; that students received peer feedback from at least two readers; and that, because of the international student body at the school, students were exposed to different cultural interpretations of their written letters. By using the game approach, students received feedback on their writing through unpredictable, real-world social interaction rather than uninterested, obligatory student peer reviews. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/NAV)

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Improving Writing for International Business through Peer Reviews

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Improving Writing for International Business through Peer Reviews

Introduction

Bob, Rosa, and Tom sat in their peer review group, staring silently for a moment at the peer editing sheets just handed to them by their busy writing teacher. Feeling a bit turned off about the idea of reading each other's papers and having to fill out peer review sheets, they began to chat about the party they were planning for next Friday night, knowing that in a class of 30 students, their teacher could not carefully monitor each group's activities. Forty minutes later, near the end of the class, they turned their attention back to the review exercise, hastily scribbling some bland comments to questions on their review sheets: "Fine," "Good job," "No problem." By the end of the hour, the party was planned, the peer review sheets were finished, and little feedback on writing was gained.

As this scenario suggests, student peer review of writing--to be successful--needs the effective participation of peers, and that is not guaranteed. Peers may focus largely on mechanical errors, ignoring the "development of ideas, organization, and the overall focus of what they are writing" (Keh, 1990, p. 296). Mangelsdorf (1992) has recorded student apprehensions about peer expertise, apathy, and specificity of comments. Mangelsdorf has also pointed out that students of Asian sociocultural backgrounds may particularly dislike peer review because it departs greatly from the teacher-centered

norms of classroom instruction to which they may be accustomed. If students perceive peer review as ineffective, they may also question the teacher's motives for using it. As a case in point, an EFL student of mine a few years ago once angrily scrawled in his writing journal, "Peer reviews are ways for lazy teachers to teach lazy students!"

Fortunately, there is a way to enjoy the many benefits of peer review without the associated problems. The purposes of this article are to (1) present the origin of Interactive Business Letters as a form of peer review of writing, (2) present the activity's general operation, and (3) discuss its benefits by sharing some examples of student peer reviews.

The Origin of Interactive Business Letters

As part of my responsibilities as an EFL instructor at the International Trade Institute (ITI) in Taiwan, I regularly taught business writing for about 3 years to Chinese EFL students. ITI is a 2-year, graduate-level business and foreign language institute sponsored by the China External Trade Development Council of Taiwan. Its mission is to prepare 200 full-time, adult students with the practical business and language skills needed to assume leadership in the field of international trade.

The focus of the business writing course was on teaching the principles of writing letters, memos, and short reports. Particular emphasis was placed on business letters because, as Tsui (1991) points out, they are probably the most common form

of written English communication used by business managers in Taiwan. In addition, virtually all of the students at ITI planned to reenter the work force as international business managers after graduation, so their interest in mastering effective skills in English business correspondence was high.

Several skills are needed to become an effective business writer (Mendelson, 1988). Business writing tends to be unique in that the writer often has a persuasive goal in mind for a very specific audience, such as a customer, a colleague, or a boss. Careful audience analysis coupled with a relatively friendly, informal writing style are preferred. Clarity, conciseness, and courtesy are also valued.

Probably the best method of developing skillful audience analysis and the other business writing skills is to have students actually draft and send correspondence to business people within the local community (Gillespie, 1985). This is undoubtedly good advice for English teachers of business writing in the U.S. and other predominantly English-speaking countries, but not for EFL teachers in Taiwan, where the opportunities to exchange correspondence in English are very limited. Of course, peer review could give students needed experience writing in English for different audiences; however, the trick for the teacher is to make these exercises both stimulating and educational.

Shortly after arriving at ITI, I decided to part company with my otherwise traditional approach toward peer review.

Rather than having students read and critique each other's work using peer review sheets as disinterested (and often uninterested) observers, I began having them assume the roles of players actively involved in a business negotiation. Their objective was to negotiate through written correspondence a series of business deals with unseen clients who were, in fact, classmates. By exchanging business correspondence in a business simulation, the students could see the reactions to their letters from a variety of different readers. Throughout the game, I continued to read, respond to, and evaluate their correspondence to balance peer responses with instructor feedback.

I gradually chose the term "Interactive" to describe these business writing assignments because it reflects the dynamic sharing of messages and ideas that this exercise encourages within a community of business writers. Hence, the exercise is called "Interactive Business Letters."

The Simulation's Operation

The first step is to prepare students to draft business correspondence for a particular industry. After the students have been introduced to some standard rhetorical strategies and formats for routine letters, good-news letters, bad-news letters, collection-and-credit letters, memo reports, and personal resumes, I provide basic checklists to help them in drafting each of these kinds of business writing (Swindle & Swindle, 1989). I later provide them with a copy of an article

about a particular industry, such as "The Supermodels," a cover story in *Time* magazine that describes international modeling and fashion (Rudolph, 1991). To encourage students to read the article at home, about a week later I administer a brief, simple written quiz of the general content. Following the quiz, we discuss the article's content in more detail as a class to clear up any misunderstanding. Prior to the quiz and in-class discussion, I write down on slips of paper the names of fashion models, designers, agents, reporters, editors, hotel managers and others, many of whom are mentioned in the article, some of whom are inventions of mine. Each student randomly selects a slip and assumes the identity drawn for the duration of the simulation. To heighten interest, the students keep their simulation identities confidential.

The second step is to carefully prepare record-keeping procedures. Once the students have their simulation identities, I ask each to give me a small slip of paper on which is written both his or her real name and the simulation identity. This is for my own records. During the next class period, I provide students with a typed comprehensive list of simulation identities--minus all real names.

The third step is to introduce the task and its procedures. The students are advised that there will be an international fashion show in the local area within the next few months. Their jobs are to make arrangements for the show. They are expected to write at least 5 letters, memos, or other

kinds of business-related correspondence, but they are not limited to that number. They may write as much and as often as they like.

To "mail" a letter to someone on the list of identities, each student must place a copy of a letter in my regular office mailbox and another copy in a class "mailbox," which is actually a marked cardboard box located outside my office. The students are advised to check the class box at least once a week for any incoming mail addressed to them. I also tell the students that out of courtesy they are expected to respond to any correspondence they receive.

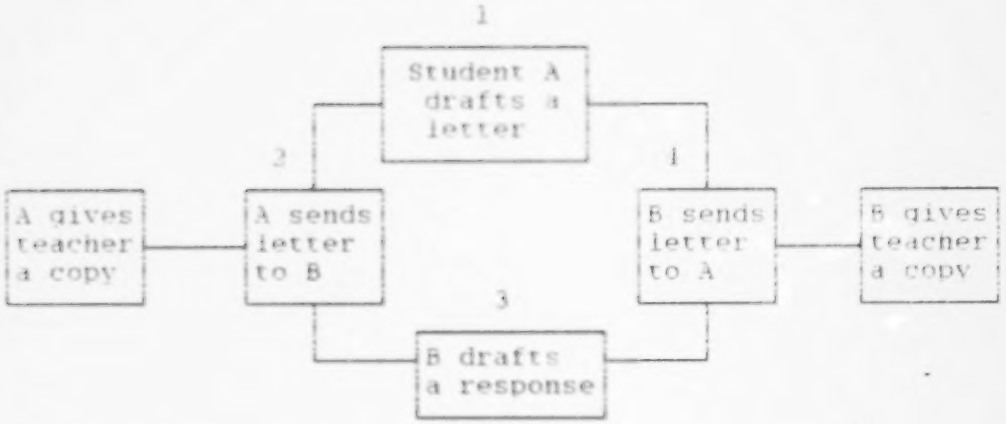
The fourth step is to balance peer responses with instructor feedback. Letters submitted to me are evaluated and returned to students as part of their regular course work. When submitting to me replies to the letters of other students, I ask that a copy of the other student's letter be attached, so that I can determine the appropriateness of the reply. For the sake of record keeping, I have students write their real names on the tops of all letters submitted to me for evaluation.

The fifth step is to place a time limit on the duration of the game. I have found that once students become engaged in the negotiation process, the amount of correspondence will often snowball after the second week. To prevent an avalance on my desk, I usually end the simulation after about 5 or 6

weeks. This provides ample time for everyone to draft at least 5 pieces of correspondence.

As the graphic depicts, the result is a writing task that creates a four-stage continuous flow of communication between participants, actively involving each in a lively business negotiation.

The Communication Flow



A summary outline of important procedures of how to implement the simulation is provided below:

The Simulation's Operation

Step	Description
1. Prepare students for business correspondence.	^Introduce rhetorical strategies and formats. ^Provide business writing checklists. ^Assign an article about a particular industry. ^Discuss the article's content. ^Assign student simulation identities.
2. Prepare record-keeping procedures.	^Encourage students to keep simulation identities confidential. ^Record simulation identities next to real names on a master list.

Step	Description
3. Organize peer review procedures.	
	*Introduce the simulation situation.
	*Assign a minimum number of items to be written.
	*Establish a mailbox for students to write each other.
4. Provide teacher feedback on student correspondence.	
	*Advise students to submit copies of all game-related correspondence to the teacher.
	*Have students write their real names on the top of all correspondence to be read by the teacher.
5. Place a time limit on the simulation's duration.	
	*Limit the simulation to 5 or 6 weeks.
	*Encourage students to avoid a last-minute rush.

Because of variations in EFL/ESL teaching situations, there may well need to be variations in the application of the simulation's procedures. This is the focus of the next section.

Variations and Adaptations

Although articles about entertainment, banking, and manufacturing could be used, I prefer the fashion industry article because its topic appeals to the young men and women I teach in Taiwan, many of whom pay great attention to the clothing labels they wear. The key is to introduce an industry that the students are interested in so that they will learn more about it and the people who run it. Publications besides *Time* and industries other than fashion can be used, based on the availability of materials and the interests of students.

In addition, the simulation's procedures can be adjusted to accommodate various local situations. When photocopy machines are unavailable, I ask students to type or handwrite two copies of each letter: one for the class mailbox and one

for me. Since business letters and memos are usually fairly short, providing the extra copy is seldom a problem.

Likewise, if it is inconvenient to have a mailbox in a fixed location, students can mail their letters at the beginning of each class by submitting two copies of letters to me: one for their student correspondent and one for me to evaluate. I then place all letters intended for student correspondents in a large paper envelope which serves as a portable mailbox. Students may pass the envelope around in class or during break to collect any correspondence they might have been sent. This approach saves time and protects the confidentiality of participants.

The simulation is also suitable for many large and small classes. In fairly small classes of at least 12 to 15, students have the opportunity to correspond with several others representing key roles in industry, making the activity more interesting and meaningful than it might otherwise be for a very small class of only 5 or 6. In larger classes of 30 to 40, students assume a wider range of industry roles and have greater choice in selecting the recipients of their correspondence, which makes the activity appear even more realistic.

To help ease the burden of correction in larger classes, the teacher could reduce the number of required letters and memos from 5 per student to 3. Another option that I prefer is to encourage students to write 5 or more letters and memos,

but with the understanding that I will only read and comment on 3 or 4 per student. In this way students are encouraged to write a lot, to receive responses from classmates, and to become a little more self-reliant in the development of their own writing.

Some Benefits and Examples

This method of peer review provides several benefits for students. To illustrate, examples of student correspondence are offered from one class of business writing students to illustrate at least six different benefits of the interactive simulation technique.

First, Interactive Business Letters inject a strong element of realism into the peer review process. Students are not just reading letters in the classroom and "objectively" evaluating them by filling in editing sheets. They are actively involved with, and responding to, each other in a business simulation. This is in keeping with Schleppegrell and Royster's (1990) evaluative criteria of appropriate classroom activities for professional people: "We judged activities to be appropriate when they provided professionals with practice in language situations comparable to those they confront at work, and allowed them the opportunity to make errors and engage in realistic interaction in English" (p. 6).

A second benefit is the activity often provides students with thorough, thoughtful responses to the content of their written work from at least two readers. As the instructor, I

read and comment on each student's letter, memo, or other correspondence from a more objective outsider's perspective. This is one form of feedback. In addition, each student receives a response to a letter from another student who, according to the rules of the game, is an active participant in the business negotiation process. Another important advantage might be that in an international business simulation, students receive feedback from peers representing different cultures.

I have observed that peers often correct each other when the content of correspondence is incorrect or otherwise inappropriate. For instance, a student--assigned to the simulation identity of a television news executive--had not bothered to read the article carefully or to otherwise familiarize himself with the details of the simulation. The body of his first letter to a fashion model's agent is provided below:

Dear Ms. Druthers:

I am an executive news producer of China TV. I would like to know what kinds of products your company will be showing at the Hsin Chu fashion show this year. Since many people in Taiwan are interested in computers, any information about them would be very appreciated.

The recipient of the above letter understood that the writer had failed to do his homework and misunderstood the details of the simulation and the fashion industry. Her job was to point this out, but to do so within the role of her game identity. Following the general guidelines for a bad-news

letter, she began with a buffer, presented the correcting comment, and then presented a face-saving alternative and a sales pitch:

Dear Mr. Chen:

I have read your recent letter asking about computer information technology and computer shows in Taiwan. Although this is an interesting field and I'd like to help you very much, but I'm afraid that I can't. I'm a fashion model agent. I'm not a computer salesman.

Anyway, there will be a colorful international fashion show in Hsin Chu very soon. It should be very interesting for your audience. If you are interested in broadcasting this show, please let me know. I will try to arrange an interview for you with my beautiful models.

Good luck to you, Mr. Chen.

The student who received the letter above realized his mistake and read the article. Afterward, he wrote the letter below in reply, which briefly refers to the embarrassing misunderstanding, but quickly steps beyond this to take full advantage of the business opening presented.

Dear Ms. Druthers:

Pardon me for my misunderstanding of your job as a fashion agent.

Yes, I'm aware of the upcoming fashion show in Taiwan. It would be my honor to interview you and one of your models after you arrive. Would you send me a list of names of models? Also, when would you be available for an interview?

I'm looking forward to hearing from you soon.

A third benefit is it sensitizes students to the nuances of language and to the need for careful audience analysis in the prewriting and drafting stages. Another student, role playing the manager of a local security firm, sent the

following patronizing, sexist letter to a fashion model's agent:

Dear Ms. Smith:

I have heard that your girls may be coming to model in the Hsin Chu International Fashion Show this year. That's great!

Chinese people in Taiwan are friendly and honest, but even here we must be concerned about the security of our valuables. My security firm--Dragon Protective Services--is one of the oldest and best. We can provide full 24-hour coverage, to keep your pretty girls safe while they work in the show.

Enclosed is a brochure of our services and fees.

Ms. Smith, actually a male student, responded by protesting the sender's use of "girls" and "valuables" to refer to women. (I also advised against this usage.) The offending student corrected the objectionable parts and wrote an apology to Ms. Smith.

A fourth benefit is it encourages inventive use of language and rhetorical strategies. It is often assumed, even by some teachers within the field of business communication, that situations in business are fairly predictable and that the rhetorical strategies used are largely formulaic (Bracher, 1987; Hagge, 1987). However, in recent years the process methods of teaching writing have influenced the business writing field. The importance of originality in business correspondence and the recognition of the need for creative responses to various business writing situations is also reflected in the literature (Mendelson, 1988; Bivler, 1987).

An example of how the simulation encouraged original writing can be seen in the example below. A student--acting as

an agent for a model--had received an invitation for her client to attend the upcoming fashion show. Out of gratefulness, she decided to send a thank-you note to one of the show's organizers using a form letter from the *Webster's Guide to Business Correspondence* (Merriam-Webster, 1988, p. 311). The original letter found in the book is presented below:

Dear Barbara:

Thank you very much for all the kind hospitality that you and Bill showed to me during my stay in Silver City. I thoroughly enjoyed my tour of the city and the wonderful meal that you and Bill managed to put together on such short notice.

I certainly hope to see you again at this year's sales meeting. And again, many thanks to you both for making my trip such a pleasant one.

After adjusting the verb tenses in the letter from past to future and amending a few details, the student with the simulation identity of agent sent the following:

Dear Ms. Schiffer:

Thank you very much for all the kind hospitality that I know you will show to me during my future stay in Hsin Chu city. I am thoroughly looking forward to my tour of the city and the wonderful entertainment that you will need to put together on such short notice. Sorry for the trouble.

I certainly want to see you at this year's fashion show. And again, many thanks to you for wanting to make my trip such a pleasant one.

The student role playing Ms. Schiffer responded by politely but firmly canceling the previous agreement, leaving the chagrined student role playing the agent to reconsider the wisdom of using "canned letters" in business correspondence.

A fifth benefit is this peer review motivates students to write. Most of my 20 business writing students participated enthusiastically. Whenever letters were unanswered, I urged writers to contact their peers again, using whatever persuasive skills they could to gain a response. Although I asked for a minimum of 5 pieces of correspondence from each for a total of 100, 160 pieces were written, with the mean being 8.0 per student. By the end of the simulation, which lasted for 5 weeks, each student had contributed the minimum of 5 pieces.

A sixth benefit is that although this activity is intended to improve business correspondence skills, I would recommend it to teachers of other kinds of writing. Learning to draft basic business letters is a valuable, practical skill in itself. Likewise it promotes several useful writing skills--such as clarity, conciseness, appropriate tone, and audience awareness--that can be readily applied in academic and other kinds of writing.

Conclusion

The game offers practice in writing through unpredictable social interaction, which challenges students to use their best judgment in writing a response to a specific situation. The beauty and the importance of this point is echoed by Mendelson (1988), who writes, "We need to stimulate the student writer to become a fully engaged participant in, not just a docile witness to, the process of choice between

various potential arrangements" (p. 68). According to my experience, by using this form of peer review, each student truly does become a "fully engaged participant."

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